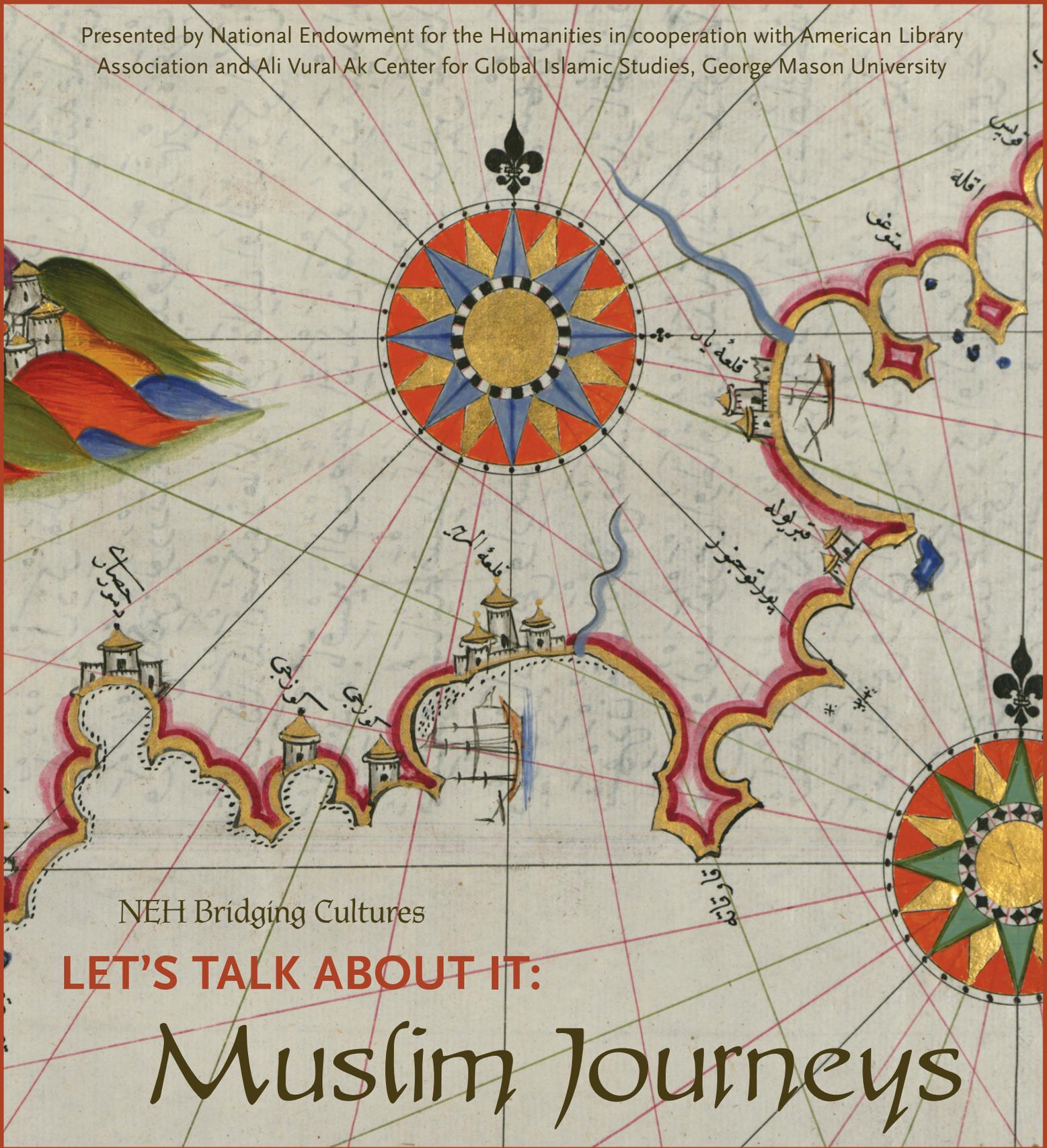


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NEH Bridging Cultures

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

Muslim Journeys



Pathways of Faith

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Pathways of Faith

By Frederick M. Denny



Imam Mosque ©Kazuyoshi Nomachi/Corbis

The classical Islamic religious tradition and civilization emerged in the Arabian Peninsula and the surrounding regions, eventually extending from the Atlantic Ocean in the west, across the northern half of Africa, to Central Asia and on to South and Southeast Asia. Their numbers totaling about 1.57 billion, Muslims today

make up the second-largest religious community in the world. Only Christianity has a greater number of adherents, about 2.3 billion. From Egypt to Indonesia, Muslims today share certain fundamental principles and practices, but express their religious beliefs in a wide variety of ways.

Islam is an Arabic word meaning “surrender, submission,” specifically to the one universal god known as *Allah* in Arabic. One who submits to Allah and commits to the teachings and practices of Islam is called a Muslim, a “submitter.” Learning and obeying the monotheistic message of the Qur’an and following the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings are central to Islamic belief and practice. The Prophet’s followers seek to make a good profession of their faith by following Muhammad’s teachings and personal example. In doing so, they draw upon a body of sayings and practices, known collectively as the Hadith, through which the Prophet and his companions provided guidance on spiritual, ethical, social, legal, and leadership issues.

The notions of paths and ways resonate with Islam’s most important principle: following the correct pathway to well-being and spiritual fulfillment both in this life and in the hereafter. In their daily prayers, Muslims repeatedly implore God to “guide them upon the straight path”—the straight path being the one that leads an individual through the temptations and trials of earthly life, ending in contentment in the eternal presence of God. Yet the Qur’an and the broader Islamic tradition also leave open the possibility of conceiving multiple paths and ways.

That Islam is literally a *pathway* of faith may be discerned in the important concept of the *Sharia*. This word is based on the Arabic term meaning “the way to the waterhole.” Simply put, the *Sharia* is Islam’s canon law. It systematizes the Qur’anic message and the lessons from the life of the Prophet. The *Sharia* is applicable to both personal and communal faith and works. Over the centuries, it has been explicated and interpreted in exchanges among specialists in jurisprudence, ethics, philosophy, theology, and history, each aligned with distinct legal schools that arose early in Islamic history. In various countries in the modern world, Islamic political movements have also attempted to implement *Sharia*

based on a wide range of understandings of the tradition.

The basic source of the *Sharia* is the “Noble Qur’an,” as Muslims often refer to their sacred scripture. Second only to the Qur’an as a source of law is the *sunnah*, the body of tradition about the Prophet’s life and teachings. Islam, like Judaism, is a religion based on divine law. And like Judaism, it has developed many pathways for understanding and applying its own legal sources through a variety of forms of jurisprudence, ranging from strict interpretations to more moderate and even liberal viewpoints.

The Qur’an charts out a pathway to success and prosperity for every Muslim through the practice of the Five Pillars of Islam. The first pillar is the declaration, “There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God.” This testimony, known in Arabic as *shahada*, is the closest thing to a creed in Islam. It is sufficient simply to utter it once in one’s life, freely and as a believer, to become a Muslim. Then all the other elements of belief and the prescribed duties become immediately incumbent on the one who has testified by means of the *shahada*.

The second pillar is the ritual prayer service known as *salat*. Muslims are required to perform the *salat* five times daily: early morning, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and evening. In addition, the Friday congregational service, which features a sermon, and the *salats* of funeral and the two eclipses (sun or moon) are also required.

The third pillar is almsgiving, *zakat*. The importance placed on ritual prayer and almsgiving in the Qur’an and other sources is a clear indication of the importance of the vertical relationship between humankind and God through prayer and obedience, and the horizontal relationship among Muslims through the giving of one’s wealth. Next in importance to worship is concern for others, both individually and as a community of Muslims.





Sawm, or the monthlong daytime fast during the Holy Month of Ramadan, is perhaps the best-known of Muslims' religious acts. This is the fourth pillar of Islam, and it is one of the most sacred times. During the ninth month of the Muslim lunar year, those who are observing the fast are forbidden from eating, drinking, smoking, and having marital relations. In addition, they may not chew or swallow any external matter or take medicine through any orifice. It is recommended that one eat immediately after the sun has set. One may then eat another, lighter meal before the next day's fasting begins, preferably just before dawn.

The fifth and final pillar of Islam is the *hajj*—the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is the most dramatic and developed of the Muslim ritual practices. The pilgrimage to Mecca during the holy pilgrimage month of Dhu al-Hijja (literally, “the month with the hajj”) is held annually. It is required once in each Muslim's lifetime, but only if he or she is legally an adult, as well as both physically and financially capable.

While knowing the pathway to Muslim faith enunciated in the Five Pillars is fundamental for all Muslims, serious historical differences have divided the Muslim community (*Umma*) into two branches: the Sunni majority and the no less important Shiite minority. This division occurred over a disagreement about how leadership would be handed down once Muhammad no longer led the Umma. The Shia contend that he designated his son-in-law, Ali, as his successor, with the corollary that the head of the Muslim community should always be a descendant of the Prophet. The Sunni movement coalesced in the 800s, about 150 years after Muhammad's death. Sunnis believe that authority over the Umma descends from the Prophet not through his natural heirs, but through his companions, who knew the Prophet most intimately and were given the task of compiling the Qur'an. The authority of the companions, Sunnis believe, is transmitted down to the pres-

ent through decisions and opinions of the learned and respected scholars who have succeeded them. Sharia today is interpreted by *mullahs* (religious officials) in conformity with these traditions, a practice that often results in a rather literal interpretation of the Qur'an. Today, about 85 percent of Muslims are Sunnis; the largest concentration of Shia lives in Iran and Iraq.

In addition to the Shiite and Sunni communities is the widely followed mystical pathway known as Sufism. Adherents to Sufism have their own spiritual disciplines known as *Tariqa*. An Arabic term, *Tariqa* occurs in the Qur'an and may mean “spiritual pathway.” In a symbolic sense, the Sharia is the main pathway, the *highway* for faith and activities for all Muslims; whereas *Tariqa* is a general term for a wide range of additional pathways Muslims may elect to follow in pursuit of personal and communal spiritual fulfillment.

Above all, Muslims strive to believe in and worship Allah, and live as one cooperative global community as they follow their pathways of faith. In their daily salat prayer services, when all Muslims worship in the direction of the holy city of Mecca, they are unified in a global circle of the faithful. Indonesians and Chinese face westward, worshippers in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan face southward. Yemenis and Kenyans face north, while Canadians and Americans face eastward. Throughout Islamic history, the exact geographic coordinates for Mecca have been carefully calculated for every location where formal prayers are performed. Every mosque has been built to include a focal point precisely oriented toward Mecca called a *qibla*, which is marked by a niche in the wall called a *mihrab*. Having placed themselves in rows facing toward the mihrab, the faithful are led in prayer by an Imam, who stands alone before the congregation, also facing the mihrab.

Given the geographic and cultural range of Islam, it is impossible to cover all of its varieties and nuances in a summary essay or in a single book. This essay and the five books it addresses do not claim to be a definitive or comprehensive treatment of the Islamic faith. Rather, they are offered as an introduction, meant to spark conversations, comprehension, thought, and further exploration. What follows is a brief overview of the five books, arranged in a specific order to guide your reading from one title to the next.

The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam

By Francis E. Peters

The religious beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arabs included the veneration of stones, wells, trees, and sacred precincts connected with individual tribes' origins. Allah was well known in the Arab world as “the high god,” “the god,” or “God.” But worship of a high god is not the same thing as monotheism, because the high god is considered the supreme being, but not the only divinity. Communities of monotheists did exist in the Arab world before Islam; these included Zoroastrians as well as Jews and Christians. Muslims hold many of the same basic beliefs and values as Jews and Christians, although Islam is clearly distinguished from its older siblings by its own interpretations and additional beliefs and practices.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all refer to their shared beginnings with the biblical patriarch Abraham (ca. 1750 BCE). However, according to Muslim belief, it was only in Islam that the Jewish and Christian traditions realized their fulfillment. Muslims believe that the Qur'an, the “Recitation,” Islam's holy scripture, was revealed in Arabic-language segments

from Allah to the Prophet Muhammad (570–632 CE) by the archangel Gabriel over a period of twenty-two years (610–32 CE). The Qur'an includes numerous references to Jewish and Christian history and beliefs, as well as many of the important figures of the Judeo-Christian tradition, not only Abraham and Jesus but others such as Adam, Noah, Jonah, Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, David, Solomon, Ezra, John the Baptist, and Mary.

The Qur'an declares Jews and Christians to be the “People of the Book,” meaning the Bible. But the Qur'an also presents itself as the final and complete message of Allah, repeating important aspects of the preceding scriptures but correcting errors in beliefs and practices that accumulated over the centuries. In an often-cited passage (Sura 3, verse 110), Allah informs Muslims, “Ye are the best of Peoples, evolved for humankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah. If only the People of the Book had faith, it would have been best for them. Some of them are believers, but most of them are sinful.” While Muslims share many of the same basic beliefs and values as Jews and Christians, Islam also sees itself and its adherents as the one true practitioner of Allah's way.

As Islam became the majority religion in different regions, the Muslim governments that emerged as a result were often fairly tolerant (though condescending) toward the “People of the Book” (who, in Iran, the birthplace of Zoroaster, also included Zoroastrians). Within their own enclaves they were granted *dhimmi*, protected status, with their own community rules governing internal matters.

The Children of Abraham is a historical and conceptual survey of the Abrahamic traditions, whose author, Francis E. Peters, is one of today's leading scholars in the comparative knowledge and understanding of the Abrahamic religions. The book has been widely admired and read since its initial



publication in 1984, and the revised edition, published in 2004, has been rethought and thoroughly rewritten for a new generation of readers. It provides a clear and reliable overview of the beginnings and early development of monotheism in the ancient Hebrew religious world, and traces its pathway through the development of Judaism to its revolutionary offshoot, Christianity, and its independent younger sibling, Islam.

The Children of Abraham is indeed a mini-textbook of the Abrahamic religions, addressing briefly but accurately all of their basic beliefs and practices, framed in a variety of interesting ways. The book raises—and lucidly answers—questions such as these: How do scripture and tradition relate to one another? What does “worship of God” mean in each of the three faiths? How does it compare across the three faiths, and how is it different within each of them? What have “renunciation and aspiration” and “thinking and talking about God” meant in the three traditions, given their divergent ways of understanding doctrine, theology, mystical meditation practices, and rational (or philosophical) methods of analysis and interpretation?

Readily accessible to thoughtful lay readers, the main text of *The Children of Abraham* is usefully supplemented by nearly forty pages of notes that offer both the depth and breadth of a major scholarly study, supporting opportunities for further learning and reflection. Another useful feature is the glossary, which provides a valuable exercise in mastering and comparing basic technical terminology across the range of Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew-Aramaic words introduced in the main text.

Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction

By Jonathan A. C. Brown

Muslims believe that Muhammad is the last prophet God has sent into the world, bearing the divine message of the Qur'an. Previous monotheistic prophets in the Abrahamic traditions are duly respected, but Muhammad's prophetic vocation is seen also to have brought corrections to what are regarded as earlier misunderstandings of prophetic teachings. Thus, Islam is considered by its adherents to provide for the perfection of monotheistic principles, beliefs, and behavior.

The man Muhammad ibn Abdallah was born around 570 CE. By the age of 6, he had been orphaned and was taken by his uncle on caravans throughout the region. As Muhammad became an adult he was widely respected and called al-amin or “the trustworthy.” By the age of 25, he married a wealthy widow, Khadija, and began managing Khadija's caravans. It was not until around 610, when he had become a thoughtful, middle-aged man, that Muhammad the prophet came into being. This man had taken up the habit of retiring for personal meditation and spiritual cultivation to a cave near Mecca, aside Mount Hira. He would pack enough provisions for a day's retreat, after which he would return home for more, so that he might pass additional days and nights on the mountainside. He would often dream, and it was during a dream that the first revelations came to him, “like the morning dawn,” as the early Muslim historian Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri reported. A mysterious presence came to him and announced, “O Muhammad, you are the Messenger of God.”

The presence, the archangel Gabriel, appeared again and again, and finally commanded Muhammad to recite. Muhammad spoke verses that came

to him as revelations. The word *Qur'an* refers to the individual passages as well as to the entire collected body of revelations Muhammad was to receive over a period of twenty-two years until his death in 632.

The Prophet Muhammad became one of the most influential and respected religious personalities in history. It is always interesting to try to understand how he was able to inspire Muslims in so many ways without ever having claimed to be divine in any sense. The Prophet's humanness has enabled his admirers and followers to believe and behave in practical, down-to-earth ways while serving Allah in ways indicated by Muhammad in his teachings and general behavior.

Jonathan A. C. Brown's introduction to Muhammad is, as its title claims, short, but it is richly detailed and engaging. It begins with the *Sira*, the “Muslim sacred narrative of Muhammad's life,” the story of his life as viewed by devoted Muslims throughout the ages. The second section explores the sources of this biography and some of the historical and critical responses to it among both Muslims and non-Muslims. The final section of Brown's study focuses on Muhammad's importance to Muslims as the model of what a human being should strive to be in all dimensions of life. Seeing how “central Muhammad has been to Muslims' identification with their religion,” as “an object of fervent love amongst the believers,” may help readers to understand the passions that arise in reaction to portrayals of the Prophet.

The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life

By Ingrid Mattson

The Qur'an is believed by Muslims to be Allah's message to humankind on how to achieve *falāh*—success, contentment, and well-being—in this world and the next. The coming of Allah's word into the world through a human prophet parallels in some degree the Christian concept of the Incarnation, but instead of the word becoming flesh, it became a holy scriptural text. Academics sometimes employ the term *inlibration* as a parallel term to *incarnation* as a means of understanding Allah's word as being cast into the world as a “book.” But the Arabic term *Qur'an*, which means “recitation,” clearly transcends the notion of Allah's word as a “book” in the mere physical sense of ink on pages.

Ingrid Mattson's *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* is an excellent starting point for understanding and appreciating the Qur'an's presence and influence in Muslims' individual and communal devotion and living. As a woman, a native of Canada, and a convert to Islam, Mattson has a distinctive perspective on the subject. A professor of Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, she is adept at connecting the past with the present and at addressing Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Among other things, Mattson draws attention to the aesthetic enjoyment of the Qur'anic Arabic text experienced by hearing it recited or by seeing it rendered in beautifully inscribed calligraphy, not only as text in books but also as a prominent decorative element in mosques and on other works of art and architecture.

Quoting one of the first revelations in the Qur'an, “Recite, for your Lord is most generous”



(96:1-5), Mattson observes that “recitation preceded writing and has been the privileged means by which the Qur’an has been preserved and transmitted from the time of the Prophet Muhammad until today.” Muslims recite their scripture in many ways, varying from spiritually satisfying basic rhythmic recitations to advanced types of chanting that can be very moving for both Muslim and non-Muslim listeners.

Muslims around the world participate in recitation contests that are judged by professional reciters and include boys and girls in specific age and skill groups, as well as men and women. Many reciters memorize long passages of the Qur’an, and down through the ages many have memorized the entire text. This tradition is nicely illustrated in the film *Koran by Heart*, which is included in the Muslim Journeys Bookshelf.

The Art of Hajj

By Venetia Porter

The pilgrimage to Mecca (the hajj) was practiced long before Muhammad’s time by polytheistic Arabs, who were attracted in large numbers to ancient holy sites at this important trading center situated in a valley amid the coastal mountains of the western Arabian Peninsula.

The introduction of Islam to Arabia under the Prophet’s leadership included the transformation of the ancient hajj into a spiritual journey marked by strong monotheistic principles and practices. Nowadays it brings millions of Muslims from around the world to Mecca for several days of ritual practices in what may be characterized as Islam’s *axis mundi*.

Mecca is the focal point toward which Muslims direct their daily prayers. The salat, the ritual of the five daily prayer services, symbolizes an ongoing spiritual journey to Mecca, and is a powerful reminder

of the ideal of a unified focus of meaning and responsibility. This sense is intensified when Muslim pilgrims, women and men known, respectively, as *hajjas* and *hajjis*, congregate in Mecca around the Kaaba, a small building in the courtyard of the Great Mosque that, because it is said to contain a black stone given by the archangel Gabriel to Abraham, is regarded as the ritual-geographic center of the Muslim world.

Venetia Porter, curator of Islamic and modern Middle Eastern art at the British Museum in London, has brought together a treasury of artistic expressions of the hajj and its richly varied meanings down through Islamic history. There are numerous ways in which *The Art of Hajj* can be used in learning about Muslim life. It reveals the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, countries, and societies represented by the pilgrims and illustrates how the experience of the hajj strengthens loyalty and cooperation in the global Muslim community, teaching pilgrims to appreciate, respect, and take pleasure in the diversity of their fellow spiritual travelers. More than mere illustrations, the artworks in Porter’s book provide an unusual and absorbing visual means of learning about Islam and Muslim life from the perspective of the hajj.

The Meccan hajj is the only *required* pilgrimage for Muslims, provided an individual’s resources, health, and responsibilities permit. But, as Porter reminds readers, Muslims make many other devotionally motivated journeys to shrines, burial places of holy persons, and historically important religious sites, such as Medina. A visit to Medina, 210 miles north of Mecca, is not required as part of the hajj, but most hajjis do visit the site of Muhammad’s mosque tomb in Medina, either before or after the hajj itself. Such journeys are not defined as pilgrimages; only the hajj qualifies for that status. Instead, such a journey is called a *ziyāra*, the Arabic word for “visit.” Ziyāras are common among Muslims around the world. They often include major public gather-

ings and activities, including parades with banners, floats, and music, particularly when they are focused on a saint’s birthday celebration. Both Sunni and Shiite Muslims make ziyāras, often traveling considerable distances. Ziyāras are a form of popular religion among Muslims, often embodying and expressing regional customs and practices that are sometimes regarded as deviations from Islamic orthodoxy.

Rumi: Poet and Mystic (1207-1273: Selections from His Writings Translated from the Persian with Introduction and Notes)

By Reynold A. Nicholson

Another major pathway of faith for Muslims is reflected in the diverse range of mystical traditions known collectively as *Sufism*. The terms Sufism and Sufi are traced to the word for coarse woolen frocks, similar to Christian monks’ habits, worn by early Muslim ascetics. Sufism does not require that one embrace asceticism, although some of its practitioners continue to prefer that kind of devotional piety.

Sufis have had their own, quite independent ways of thinking about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad and how Muslims may regard him as they seek enlightenment. The Sufis see their beloved Prophet as thoroughly saturated by the Qur’anic message, and they believe that in reading it Muhammad’s soul is made manifest. They especially delight in recalling Muhammad’s mysterious “night journey” up through the seven heavens to the presence of God. In this initiatory experience Muhammad was given the special power and wisdom that Sufis consider to be the charter of their own continued existence, because they trace their lineage back to

Muhammad and through the “night journey” to God himself.

Sufism speaks of a pathway called *Tarīqa* that differs considerably from the Sharia. Like Sharia, *Tarīqa* means “way,” but in the context of Sufism, *Tarīqa* can also mean “method,” “system,” “procedure,” or “creed.” The Sharia is generally concerned with the external way of all Muslims, in that it deals with people’s actions, whereas *Tarīqa* more often focuses on an inner way, beyond adherence to the Sharia. It can be quite individualistic, although many charismatic mystical Muslims over the centuries have attracted numerous followers. Sufic movements range from those that are very “sober” in their commitment to adhere strictly to Islamic teachings, to those that advocate surrender to “intoxicating” union with God, and varieties in between.

Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–73) was a leading Sufi master who wrote an enormous corpus of poetry in the Persian language. Born in Afghanistan, as a young man Rumi fled with his family to Turkey, and there at the age of thirty-seven, when he was well established as a teacher, he met a wandering dervish who inspired his poetic vocation. He was not a retiring writer who observed the world from a slight distance. He was fully engaged in the life of his order.

Rumi preached and wrote thousands of poems, often in a trance. These poems describe Rumi’s longing for and experience of the divine. His work is ecstatic: in every encounter he sought the godhead—for him friendship was spelled with a capital F—and his revelations about the nature of the human condition are as pointed as they are timeless. He believed that in the great mystery of existence we are all united, a revelation that has made him one of the most popular poets in the world.

Rumi’s poetry continues to be widely read throughout the world, in both the original Persian



and translations, and adds to Sufism’s surprisingly strong ecumenical appeal. The English translations by the University of Cambridge professor Reynold A. Nicholson (1868–1945) are greatly admired by specialists as well as the general reading public.

Nicholson’s introduction to his translation provides a basic knowledge of Rumi and his times in the period when Sufism was increasingly moving in pantheistic, monistic directions—that is, toward a belief in the unity of reality and the presence of God in all things.

At the core of Rumi’s thought was his conviction that God is both hidden and revealed. In other words, God is beyond his creation and, at the same time—paradoxically—immanent in the world of appearances. Rumi believed that God reveals himself mainly through the Qur’an. But Rumi went beyond the scriptural text of the Qur’an to weave folklore and traditional tales, as well as neo-Platonic, biblical, and Christian ideas, into his poetry. His work poured forth from him more often in ecstatic exuberance than in reflective composition. He is reported to have been a joyful person who wanted always to share his sense of life.



Frederick Mathewson Denny is professor emeritus of Islamic Studies and History of Religions at the University of Colorado at Boulder. An alumnus of the College of William and Mary and Andover Newton Theological School, he also holds MA and PhD degrees from the University of Chicago and has held teaching appointments at Colby-Sawyer College, Yale University, and the University of Virginia. He has conducted field research on Qur’anic recitation, Muslim popular ritual, and contemporary Muslim societies in Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and North America. His publications include a widely used college-level textbook, *An Introduction to Islam* (4th edition Pearson Prentice Hall, 2010). He is founding editor of the scholarly book series *Studies in Comparative Religion*. He was lead editor for the second edition of *Atlas of the World’s Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Denny served for eleven years on the board of directors of the American Academy of Religion.

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Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies supports research, interdisciplinary academic programs, and community outreach to advance knowledge and understanding of Islam as a world religion, its role in world history, and current patterns of globalization in Muslim societies. The center aspires to be a hub of international excellence for research and learning, and to promote a sophisticated understanding of the complex dynamics that shape Muslim societies and communities worldwide.

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Cover: Fifteenth-century map by Piri Reis of the coastline of Andalusia and the city of Granada.
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